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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000893

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN; DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PGOV AM

SUBJECT: PARLIAMENTARIANS, MANY OTHER DETAINEES

RELEASED; DEMIRCHIAN PROMISES NEW RALLY

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

2. (SBU) Armenian opposition leaders Stepan Demirchian and Artashes Geghamian brushed off calls for dialogue with the government, instead calling for a new rally against President Kocharian in central Yerevan April 16. The police unsealed the offices of the National Accord Party April 14, and reopened the Republic Party offices April 15. The police report that 115 people were either detained or taken in for questioning since April 13. The police released all four national assembly members who had been held as witnesses, and many others who had been taken into custody April 12-13. President Kocharian issued an appeal to the opposition to resume "normal activities," but promised further police action against "political extremism." End Summary.

OPPOSITION DEFIES GOVERNMENT; PLANS NEW RALLY

3. (SBU) Despite the authorities' crackdown on their activities during the previous 48 hours, opposition leaders Stepan Demirchian and Artashes Geghamian pledged April 14 to continue their anti-government campaign. Defying a government ban on further unsanctioned rallies and rejecting calls to engage in a dialogue with the government, Demirchian and Geghamian announced that another demonstration against the government would be held April 16 in Yerevan's Opera Square. Demirchian confirmed his plans in a press conference April 15. (Comment: One senior government official told us they didn't care what the opposition did at Opera Square, so long as they stayed there. End Comment.)

POLICE LEAVE PARTY OFFICES

4. (SBU) The police unsealed the offices of Artashes Geghamian's National Accord Party the afternoon of April 14. The offices had been raided by the police immediately following the dispersal of the opposition demonstration in front of the National Assembly during the morning of April 13. Geghamian claimed that police had confiscated most party documents, and thoroughly ransacked the headquarters. Police also vacated the offices of the Republic Party at approximately 1:00 p.m. April 15. Republic Party leader Aram Sargsyan has not made a public appearance since the authorities broke up the opposition rally April 13, and his supporters claim he is in hiding. The Procurator-General had singled out the Republic Party's leadership as most likely to face criminal prosecution for their calls for the violent overthrow of the state.

PARLIAMENTARIANS RELEASED, DETENTION FIGURES UNCLEAR

5. (SBU) The police released the four opposition deputies detained for questioning April 12-13. Ruzanna Khachatryan, spokeswoman for Demirchian's Armenian People's Party, also left police custody April 14. She told us that the police treated her well during her 48 hours of detention (septel). The Yerevan City Police reported that 115 people were detained during the same period, of whom 71 were no longer in police custody. Although opposition parties told us that they think the number of detentions was significantly higher, Human Rights Ombudsman Larissa Alaverdian, who has visited detention facilities, told us that she believes the police numbers are generally accurate.

GOAM OFFICIALS DEFEND POLICE ACTIONS DURING RALLY

16. (SBU) Senior GOAM maintain that the force employed during the rally was at a commensurate and acceptable level. In a televised interview, Procurator-General Aghvan Hovsepyan said that "If the police, having acted in full accord with the letter and spirit of the law, had not prevented the further development of illegal actions of demonstrators on the night of 12-13 April, we would have to apply more severe official enforcement measures against the violators." President Kocharian also defended the actions of the police against "political extremists," and called on the opposition to participate in a political dialogue. He stated that police would not have interfered with the demonstrators if they had remained in Opera Square, but the opposition had chosen to provoke the authorities by rallying in front of the parliament. Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian told the Ambassador April 14 that he and several other prominent ministers were in agreement that the opposition must be engaged to prevent a further worsening of the situation. The Dashnakutyun Party, a member of the governing coalition, issued a statement calling for incorporating the opposition in governing bodies in order to defuse current tensions. (Note: The Dashnakutyun have suggested a place on the National Security Council for the opposition. End Note.)

COMMENT: SITUATION STILL TENSE

17. (SBU) The situation between the GOAM and the opposition remains tense. Government authorities seem willing to open discussions with the opposition, but the opposition seems unlikely to heed Kocharian's plea for them to resume "normal activities." For their part, leading opposition figures are in no mood for any dialogue with the government--at least for now. They likely hope that their April 16 rally will demonstrate growing support for their position. Our best guess is that while most citizens disapprove of the government's tactics, this does not translate into active support for the opposition. A weather forecast that calls for rain makes a large turnout even less likely. We cannot rule out completely, however, either provocation by the opposition, or overkill by the government.
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